



Want to grow the renewable energy sector? Make auto and air travel a lot more expensive, former US Congressman says

27/1/2011

By Dan McCue

At 83, former US Congressman Pete McCloskey admits he's not as up on the inner workings of renewable energy policy as others, but the plain spoken architect of much of America's extant environmental policy doesn't lack for opinions on the contemporary scene.

"Frankly," the former Republican politician from the US state of California told Renewable Energy Magazine a few days before President Obama's State of the Union address, "I think solar, wind and geothermal all deserve such help as the government can provide.

"But remember," he said, "renewable energy choices were not at issue when I was in the Congress between 1967 and 1982. [As a result,] I don't know what, specifically, the government can do to further the growth of renewable energy, other than to make automobile and air travel a hell of a lot more expensive."

These days McCloskey and his wife Helen are commercial organic farmers in Northern California who recycle all they can, employ solar panels for power, and rely on gravity-fed, free water from what the former Congressman colourfully describes as "California's second oldest ditch."

"It was built in 1870 when the tomato farmers around Winters (California) bought the top seven feet of Clear Lake, which is used between 1 April and 1 October each year, to flow into Cache Creek for irrigation purposes," he said, adding, "We try to use drip irrigation when possible."

But if McCloskey is a fan of renewable energy, it was his experience as a lawmaker in a very challenging era that REM most wanted to talk about in hopes of divining a sense, perhaps, of how energy and carbon-emissions legislation may be crafted in the new Congress and beyond.

Meaningful policy depends on grassroots support

McCloskey, a one-time Deputy District Attorney and lecturer on the topic of legal ethics at the Santa Clara and Stanford Law Schools in California, ran for office as an anti-war candidate at the height of the Vietnam War, and latter would even, though unsuccessfully, challenge incumbent President Richard Nixon for the Republican nomination for president in 1972 on the same platform.

During a breathless stretch beginning in 1970 and extending, roughly, through 1975, he co-chaired the Congressional subcommittee that made the first Earth Day possible, and helped usher into law the US Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Air and Waters Acts, among other environmental protections.

How did it all happen? According to the McCloskey, the momentum in Congress was born of a strong grassroots movement outside of the halls of government and its power to effect change at the polls.

In late 1969, inspired by early stirring of an environmental movement across the US, Senator Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat from Wisconsin, conceived of Earth Day as a mechanism to inspire awareness and appreciation for the earth's natural environment.

Wanting to make the steering committee for his effort bi-partisan, Nelson asked McCloskey, a fellow environmentalist, to be its co-chair. Their activities led to a lengthy New York Times piece about their ideas, which in turn inspired Danish ayes, a Harvard graduate student, to travel to Washington to see how he could get involved. Soon, at Nelson's urging, Hayes was dropping out of Harvard, assembling a staff and organizing the Earth Day effort across the United States.

"The environment for enacting environmental legislation started in January, 1971, after the kids who participated in the first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970, got involved in organized, formal politics and elections, and knocked out of Congress the two Democrats and five of the 10 Republicans they had labelled 'The Dirty Dozen,' for their terrible environmental records," McCloskey said.

"Suddenly, when Congress reconvened that January, everybody said, 'I'm now an environmentalist,' and there was a good majority in the House and Senate to consider protection of the environment," he continued. "And with John Ehrlichman, the President's No. 2 White House advisor, the Nixon Administration cooperated, and even led the way in some instances, such as in the create of the EPA."

Many, of course, today remember Ehrlichman as one of the "President's Men," a key figure in the events leading up to the Watergate break-in and the ensuing Watergate scandal. But McCloskey remembered Ehrlichman, who served a year and a half in prison as a result of his role in the scandal, and who died in 1999, in a different light.

"John Ehrlichman had flown 26 missions in the nose cone of a B-24 bomber over Europe as a lead bombardier and was a fine lawyer and enthusiastic environmentalist before he went to the White House, and in his words 'was corrupted by the power of the White House in 3 and 1/2

years,” McCloskey said. “Nixon knew nothing and cared less about the environment, but Ehrlichman caused a lot of good things to happen before the roof fell in.”

Take advantage of political honeymoons

As the political climate turned in favour of environmentalism, McCloskey was a member of the hitherto-disregarded Fish & Wildlife Subcommittee of the now-abolished Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee chaired by John Dingell, who today, at 84, has the distinction of being the longest-serving member of the US House of Representatives.

“We pushed through many of the protective acts such as the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammals, Estuarine, and Coastal Zone acts, and the Clean Air and Water Acts went through other committee,” McCloskey said. “The honeymoon for environmental legislation lasted until the 1973 Energy crises, but bipartisan cooperation lasted until [former House Speaker] Newt Gingrich came to power in 1994.”

On a side note McCloskey, who would serve on the committee for 15 years and rise to become its Minority Ranking Member, didn’t lament the disbanding of the body. Over the years it had been so plagued by scandal that a fellow California Congressman, Don Edwards, once turned to McCloskey on the floor of the House and said, “Pete, anything that comes out of your committee ought to go to a Grand Jury.”

“He was referring, of course to the fact that of five Democratic chairmen who served during those 15 years, four had been indicted, one in the courthouse named after him in Baltimore,” McCloskey said.

The Congressman left the House in 1982, having forgone a re-election bid to run for the US Senate, a campaign that ultimately proved unsuccessful. However, McCloskey has never strayed far from politics, breaking party ranks in 2004 to endorse John Kerry in his bid to unseat George W. Bush as President of the United States, and even throwing his own hat into the ring in 2006 as a Congressional candidate against an anti-environmental Republican.

US Congress not much for long-range planning

Reflecting on the environmental side of his legacy, McCloskey said he believes the Endangered Species Act “has spawned a bureaucracy which needs some tightening, but it has been wonderful in preserving habitat from unbridled development in many areas”.

“The process of identifying endangered and threatened species and de-listing them is sometimes too lengthy, but even the US Dept. of Defence has gone along with the Act's intentions in many cases. The real challenges lie in the future... although Barbara Boxer's re-election to the Senate [last fall] is going to stop any outrageous changes [in the near term.]”

On the carbon-reduction front, McCloskey said he believes humans are contributing to climate change, “particularly with respect to carbon emissions”.

When it comes to energy policy, McCloskey opined that even a success might not ultimately be all it seems.

“I remember in 1973 being successful in getting an amendment into some bill that the Administration should annually state what its energy policy was, but I have never seen any indication that this happened,” he said. “It was a terrible thing when the US Supreme Court upheld [former Vice President] Dick Cheney's right to keep secret even the identities of the oil company representatives he met with to plan energy policy.

“That policy has clearly become international, with us willing to go to war to protect the flow of oil to our gas guzzlers,” McCloskey said.

Ultimately, the thing to remember about the US Congress is that it “has never been much for long-range planning,” he added.

McCloskey conceded that he couldn't say with any authority what he would be able to do in terms of carbon emission reduction, renewable energy or environmental policy in today's Congress.

“Both the US House and Senate have too many a--holes,” he said.